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## Resistance through Magic: Mexican author Laura Esquivel's use of magical realism in *Like Water for Chocolate*



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### A B S T R A C T

*Employing playful postmodern irony and magical realism, Laura Esquivel, the Mexican best-selling novelist, creates a parody of traditional Mexican literary genres while at the same time foregrounding the struggles of the doubly-colonized Mexican woman of the 19th Century through a thoroughly absorbing but subversive narrative in her novel Like Water for Chocolate. This paper explores the subtle ways in which Esquivel's treatment of the lot of the 19th Century Mexican woman creates a unique feminist-magical realist narrative.*

One of the prominent features of postmodern literature is the re-thinking and re-telling of traditional discourse. As Umberto Eco observes, postmodernism demands "not the negation of the already said but its ironic rethinking" (Eco 68). This ironic rethinking often involves parody. In fact, as Linda Hutcheon observes in her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, parody is the favourite mode of those who are marginalized by a dominant ideology. Parody has a certain outsiderness and it allows an artist to speak to a discourse from within it but without being totally recuperated by it.

Authors of fiction employing such ironic and parodic rethinking often focus on those living on the margins of society, low in the social hierarchy. Their fictional discourse brings out the mute resistance, the silent struggle of such marginalized characters. As Lawrence E. Cahoon remarks in his *Introduction to From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology*

The postmodernist will attend to the apparently excluded or marginalized elements of any system or text, because therein lies the keys to its structure. (Cahoon 12)

Thus, not surprisingly, we see writers of postmodern fiction focusing on such disempowered groups as indigenous people, the insane, women. What these writers go on to achieve is often a complete subversion of the traditional categories of marginal and central through the empowerment of the weak. It was in 1989 that Editorial Planeta Mexicana of Mexico brought out *Como agua para chocolate*: novella de entregas mensuales con recetas, aroses, y remedios caseros by Laura Esquivel, a first time novelist. The novel quickly went on to become a bestseller.

Then in 1991 the English version *Like Water for Chocolate*: a novel in monthly installments, with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies, translated by Carol and Thomas Christensen came out. The English version was also quick to gain commercial suc-

cess. The story of the novel is set in a ranch near Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass on the Mexican Texas border. It is a border setting that strongly indicates a marginalization from both the First World power of the United States and the centre of Mexican power in the capital. The narrator in the novel is also a chronicler of her great-aunt Tita's life. Tita belongs to the De la Garza family in northern Mexico. The period depicted is the initial part of the twentieth century. Tita's mother, the dominating and repressive Elena, maintains the traditional patriarchal norms in the family.

A widow herself, she is the female patriarch who forbids Tita from getting married as Tita is the youngest daughter of the family. The youngest daughter, according to the prevailing patriarchal norms in Mexico in those days, had to remain a spinster and look after her parents. Tita is passionately in love with Pedro but it is Tita's elder sister Rosaura who is chosen to be Pedro's wife. Pedro agrees to the marriage so as to be near Tita.

Tita is relegated to the position of the family's servant. She has to mostly inhabit the netherworld of the house- the family kitchen. It becomes Tita's sole domain and it is here that she channels her repressed desires into the various ethnic Mexican dishes that she prepares for the family and the guests. In a manner that can only be termed magical realist, Tita's passions get fused into the dishes she prepares, and once consumed, the preparations have a strange and bewildering impact on the family members.

Throughout the novel, it is Tita's focus on her cooking that empowers her and finally helps her to emancipate herself from the suffocating domination of patriarchal norms, here represented by the figure of Mama Elena, Tita's mother.

In an interview with Laura Esquivel published in New York Times book review Molly O'Neill notes that although the novel is a best-seller in Mexico, in

the United States it has been consigned to the 'charming but aren't we moderns above it' ghetto of magical realism. (O'Neill 1993). This might be due to the high-nosed attitude of the literary circle, especially in the light of the fact that ever since Marquez, authors have put in intermittent dashes of the magical in an otherwise conventional story, just for the sake of acquiring the in-vogue status of a magical realist writer, while in reality the essence of magical realism is missing from their writing.

Truly, the genre is much abused. But O'Neill adds "Even so, her mystical morality tale of a star-crossed love on the de la Garza ranch at the time of the Mexican revolution has bewitched many literary and film critics"(ibid 1993). Commenting on Esquivel's unique use of magical realism in the novel and its manifestation on celluloid, O'Neill says:

Audiences seem willing to suspend disbelief: accepting that tears shed into the batter of a wedding cake could make all the guests at the ceremony wail for their own lost loves; granting that rose petals used to perfume a quail sauce could send a prim *senorita* scampering naked as a dog in heat across the Mexican horizon to find her true love and become a general in the revolution. Even cynics seem to find divine justice when a rigid and self-inflated character dies loudly of a gastrointestinal explosion in the film. (ibid 1993)

The marginalized space of the kitchen becomes the focal point of the magical realist happenings in the novel. The socially and familially marginalized Tita is able to express her aspirations and her emotions through her cooking, whereby she magically infuses her passions into the dishes. Magical realism also enables Esquivel to completely dismantle the traditional social position and hierarchy of women in Mexican society, whereby Esquivel toys with the concepts of mother, whore, virgin and virgin-mother. As Maria Ruth Noriega Sanchez observes:

The use of magical realist strategies allows Esquivel to transgress established borders and valorize para-literary forms. The kitchen is no longer a marginal space, but a productive, magical site where cooking becomes a metaphor for writing. (Sanchez 163) The strain of subversion and resistance in the novel finds expression in its context, parodic form, questioning of social limits. Out of these three the latter two, that is the parody and the social questioning, are enforced through magical realism.

Inherently related to the issue of marginalization is the fact that *Like Water for Chocolate* is a parody of a genre, which is the Mexican version of women's fiction published in monthly installments, together with recipes, home remedies, dress-

making patterns, short poems and the calendar of Church observances. This genre is the nineteenth century forerunner of the western women's magazine. Around the mid-nineteenth century, these publications in Mexico were called 'Calendars for Young Ladies'. These publications represented the written counterpart to women's socialization. They are documents that conserve and transmit a Mexican female culture. In its parody of this literary genre,

While the family cook is usually a woman, in the public sphere male chefs are held in greater esteem and accorded more importance. It is here that Esquivel subverts tradition. She ennobles a domestic skill and turns it into an art form. She also valorizes a marginalized literary form- the installment novel. These novels were, at first, descriptions of places for family excursions, moralizing tales or detailed narratives on cooking. It was by the 1860s that the installment novel grew out of the monthly recipe. By the 1880s more elaborate love stories by women began to appear regularly.

The literary establishment never considered this genre as literature because of its episodic plots, overt sentimentality and highly stylized characterization. This genre was immensely popular. But what was overlooked by Mexico's male-dominated literary culture was that these novels were highly coded in an authentic women's language, unknown to any man. The usual creative outlets for these women were cooking, sewing, embroidery and decoration, as also conversation, storytelling, gossip and advice. Writing for other women was a natural extension of this conversation and gossip. Thus, these novels can be read as a way of life in nineteenth century Mexico. Laura Esquivel recognizes in her novel this world and this language and this recognition comes her Mexican heritage if fiercely independent women, who created a women's culture within the social prison of marriage.

#### **Ziva Ben-Porat defines parody as:**

A representation of a modeled reality which is itself already a particular representation of an original reality. The parodic representations expose the model's conventions and lay bare its devices through the co-existence of the two codes in the same message. (Ben-Porat 247) Thus, both the original form and the parodic form must be present in the text to make the parody really poignant.

This duality is clearly present in the novel. Firstly, Esquivel's title is *Like Water for Chocolate*, which translates as 'water at boiling point'. It is an expression that is used in Mexico to describe any event or relationship that is so intense that it can only be

compared to water that is on the verge of boiling, used in the preparation of a traditional Mexican dish- hot chocolate. Secondly, the title is taken directly from the model: "A Novel in monthly Installments, with Recipes, Romances and Home Remedies". The title and the sub-title cover both the parody and the model.

Thirdly, upon opening the book the reader finds, in place of an epigraph, a traditional Mexican proverb: To the table or to bed / You must come when you are bid. Another dualistic technique is Esquivel's reproduction of the format of her model. Every chapter is prefaced by the title, the sub-title, the month and the recipe for that month. The narration includes direct address on how to prepare the recipe of the month as also stories about the loves and times of the narrator's great-aunt Tita.

Each chapter ends with the information that the story will be continued and an announcement of what the next month's recipe will be. These elements, taken from the parodic model, are not superficial embellishments. The recipes and their preparation, as well as the home-remedies and their application, are an integral part of the story. There is, thus, a mutual and symbiotic relationship between the novel and its model in the reading experience.

There is extensive use of magical realism in Esquivel's novel which is not epistemological but ontological and proceeds directly from the beliefs and culture of the people portrayed, as for example the Native American belief held by Dr.Brown's grandmother about each person being a potential match-box, an idea that finds a magical realist manifestation in the novel. Also, each instance of the use of magical realism by Esquivel is thematically relevant. A brief survey of these instances shall serve to illustrate this point. The sobbing of Tita even in the pre-natal stage pre-figures her sad lot in her life: When she was still in my great-grandmother's belly her sobs were so loud that even Nacha, the cook, who was half-deaf, could hear them. (Esquivel 9)

#### **And then**

The way Nacha tells it, Tita was literally washed into this world on a great tide of tears that spilled over the edge of the table and flooded across the kitchen floor (Esquivel 10)

#### **And also**

...Nacha swept up the residue the tears had left on the red stone floor. There was enough salt to fill a ten pound sack-it was used for cooking and lasted a long time (Esquivel 10)

The magical realism used is organically integrated with the novel's thematic element-the sad life of Tita and the profuse tears that she sheds are a meta-

phor for this sadness. One more key element of the story is the passion between Tita and Pedro. This is conveyed on several occasions, the first of which is when Tita can feel Pedro's passionate gaze: She had been walking to the table carrying a tray of egg-yolk candies when she first felt his hot gaze burning her skin. (Esquivel 18) When Tita learns that the marriage between Pedro and Rosaura has been fixed she is overcome by a terrible feeling of cold, which metaphorically conveys to the readers her feeling of depression. If warmth be a universal metaphor for love and passion, the absence of love or love's being stifled can aptly be conveyed through coldness and chill as when:

She realized that the hollow sensation was not hunger but an icy feeling of grief. She had to get rid of that terrible sensation of cold. First she put on a wool robe and a heavy cloak. The cold still gripped her. Then she put on felt slippers and another two shawls. No good. (Esquivel 21) Subsequently, Tita's feelings get magically transfused into the food she prepares. In a cruel irony perpetrated by none other than Mama Elena, Tita's mother, she is entrusted with the task of preparing the wedding cake. The wedding itself is between Tita's lover Pedro and her sister Rosaura. Tita cries profusely while preparing it: "The batter wouldn't thicken because Tita kept crying". (Esquivel 31)

The wedding cake has a strong effect on everyone. It is a collective malady, reminiscent of the plague of insomnia in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* where a whole village becomes insomniac. In this part of Esquivel's novel Tita's sorrow, her tears are so thoroughly integrated into the batter that everyone is overcome with longing and nostalgia for lost love: The moment they took their first bite of the cake, everyone was flooded with a great wave of longing. (Esquivel 39) Equally potent is the next dish that embodies Tita's passions-quail with rose petal sauce. It is on Gertrudis that the concoction takes effect: But something strange was happening to Gertrudis. On her the food seemed to act as an aphrodisiac, she began to feel an intense heat pulsating through her limbs.....Gertrudis was really stricken; her whole body was dripping with sweat. (Esquivel 48-49) Gertrudis rises from the table and rushes to take a shower for some relief but it is of no avail: ...the drops that fell from the shower never made it to her body: they evaporated before they reached her. Her body was giving off so much heat that the wooden walls began to split and burn into flames (Esquivel 51)

Tita's elder sister Rosaura gives birth but fails to produce any milk for her child. A wet nurse feeds the child but after she is killed in a cross-fire of bullets, there is nobody that the child can suckle. It is then that

Tita begins to magically ooze milk and suckles Rosaura and Pedro's child to sleep: Was it possible that she was feeding the baby? She removed the boy from her breast: a thin stream of milk sprayed out. Tita could not understand it. It wasn't possible for an unmarried woman to have milk, short of a supernatural act, unheard of in these times. (Esquivel 70)

For Esquivel, magical realism is not a marketing gimmick but a subversive tool, a transforming and empowering force. She brings to the fore the sub-

jugation of the early 20th century Mexican woman. Through the aesthetics of fiction, the magical realist happenings elevate this woman from her position of imposed inferiority, giving her back the power that patriarchy had taken from her. Esquivel's fictional discourse is, on the surface, quite a fascinating read but it is easy to discern the novelist's firm, resistant stance against the norms of traditional Mexican macho-culture and the hegemony of patriarchy.

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